

**radical
democracy**



interview:
Nabil Hassein
millions march nyc
abolition square
#shutdowncityhallnyc
#movementforblacklives

Nabil Hassein Interview

David Olson interviews Nabil Hassein for Radical Democracy.

Nabil is an activist and organizer with Millions March, an NYC-based multiracial, grassroots collective committed to the Movement for Black Lives. He was an organizer for #shutdowncityhallNYC and Abolition Square, a coordinated campaign in New York, Los Angeles and Chicago, in the summer of 2016, to abolish the police.

Radical Democracy: Most of the Movement for Black Lives protests have focused on petitioning for criminal justice reform—changing policy, basically. But the protests this summer in NYC, Chicago and L.A. demanded outright abolition of the police and prison systems. It's a significant shift.

Nabil Hassein: I'm a member of Millions March NYC, a police and prison abolitionist group within the Movement. Our belief in abolition rather than reform comes from our grounding in history: in this country, more specifically New York, the police originated as slave patrols. They've been the enforcers of Jim Crow, and were killing the Black Panthers, and the Black Liberation Army, during the '60s and '70s.

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Our view is that racist police violence and murder are no accident. That's what the police are intended to do. Our demands point in the direction of abolition because we say you can't fix what isn't broken. Since the police are intended to be racist and violent, the only way forward is to abolish them, and replace them with alternative institutions designed with the uplift of Black communities in mind.

RD: Connecting policing to slavery, Jim Crow and the killing of Black liberation leaders seems to imply a serious criticism of society at large.

NH: We see a close link between abolitionist politics and anti-capitalist politics. **A common refrain that you hear both within and outside of the Movement for Black Lives is that the police exist to uphold law and order. But we have to ask what kind of law and question what type of order.** Especially in New York City: we have the most billionaires in the country, the most fabulous wealth, and at the same time, the number of people sleeping in the streets increases every year. Police violence and murder is unchecked. Sexual violence, gender violence is rampant.

That's the order that the police exist to uphold. Their function is to maintain the concentration of wealth, where a few people monopolize the resources of the society and leave so little for the rest of us. That's why we fight for abolition and not reform. **There's no way that tinkering around the edges of this system could ever lead to anything than more of the same.**

RD: How did the idea for occupying City Hall Park, and creating “Abolition Square” come about?

NH: Our group has the word "march" in it, but there was a sentiment that we were exhausted with marching. We've been marching for so long we want to try something else, and encampment is a very old tactic. To have three encampments going on in L.A., New York, and Chicago at the same time was very valuable in terms of attention to the Movement, especially in putting forward a specifically abolitionist message — which was particularly strong coming out of Chicago.

RD: I'm sure some people are intrigued by the idea of abolition, but wondering how we would keep our communities safe if we get rid of the police. What sort of institutions or processes might replace traditional policing?

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NH: There's no way anyone can predict, exactly. It's going to look different in different communities. In terms of the demands put forward at Abolition Square, one points in this direction the most clearly: to defund the NYPD's five and a half billion dollar annual budget, and reinvest it in the city's Black and other working class communities.

If we look at the communities that are actually safe, like the Upper East Side, they're not safe because they have police standing on every street corner ready to snatch people up for petty crimes. De Blasio came in as mayor talking about a "tale of two cities," and he wasn't lying about that. He's lied about many things, but that was a true statement. And in only one of those two cities does his NYPD deploy broken windows policing. **Real safety in our communities means access to the kind of resources that affluent communities have.** Access to affordable housing, to healthcare, including mental healthcare. Access to education, transportation, good paying jobs that pay a living wage. That's what we need to see for our communities.

I would never deny that violence exists in our communities, even before the police get involved. It's a serious issue that we have to address.

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But it's clear that **jails and prisons don't actually decrease the violence in this society. They just mask it and concentrate it in a few places.** I don't know how long we can expect to keep it in places like Rikers Island or Sing Sing or Attica before it just reaches a point where it's going to erupt beyond those walls.

RD: Yeah, it seems that just getting bodies in jail is often a higher priority than addressing causes of violence, or keeping communities safe.

NH: Here in New York City the number one arrest is for jumping the turnstile. When someone is arrested for something petty like that, and then you put them in Brooklyn Central Booking or in Rikers Island, they're going to do what they need to do to survive. It does not rehabilitate or help the community or decrease violence in any way.

When we look at the fact that police commit domestic violence at twice the national average rate, it's clear that bringing them into our communities' disputes is not going to help solve those disputes.

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We need to first think about how to prevent as many of these incidents as possible from taking place, then think about what restorative and transformative justice would look like in our communities when these incidents do occur. Even in a world after abolition, I'm not going to say that these things won't happen, you know? But I think a civilized society would have an alternative means to address them than putting human beings in cages, because that doesn't actually address the root causes of patriarchy and racism that causes violence. I advocate for community self-determination over what these processes would look like, and that's going to look different in every community.

There are groups doing this work – the Audre Lorde Project has something called the Safe Outside the System Collective, for example. There's so much work to be done, and it's challenging while the State holds the power – the police are the ones with the ability to commit violence or hold people against their will without being held accountable. I'm not going to say that we have fully worked-out answers. We're in conversations about what alternatives would look like, but ultimately it's going to be people in the community who build these alternatives.

RD: Right. It's about people making the decisions that affect their communities. A week into the occupation at Abolition Square, the first demand was met when Police Commissioner Bratton resigned. Why was Bratton targeted, and how big a victory was his resignation?

NH: It was a huge victory for the grassroots. There's been organizing against Bill Bratton ever since Bill de Blasio announced him as police commissioner, well before he took office. The fact that a so-called liberal, progressive mayor was bringing back Rudy Giuliani's hand-picked and notoriously racist police commissioner should have been an indication about what this mayor is actually about, despite all his nice words.

Bill Bratton is known as the architect of the racist policy of broken windows policing, which essentially targets Black people, Latin people, working-class people of all backgrounds, for enforcement of petty crimes — and sometimes not even crimes, just violations. Including the most petty offenses imaginable, like jumping the subway turnstile. The idea that this is somehow going to reduce major crime is ridiculous. People are jumping the turnstile because the subway fare is expensive, and Black people need to get around one way another, despite the fact that they have no jobs, or jobs that don't pay enough for them to be able to move around the city.

Jumping turnstiles is not what's causing murder or violent crime. There's no evidence that this policy does anything to keep communities safe, despite the NYPD's huge investment in it. We've seen it exported from New York to L.A. and Boston, places where Bratton was commissioner, and fact that he has such a close association with this racist policy meant that he had to go.

As an abolitionist group our problems with the police are systemic and structural, and they're much bigger than one

person. That's why our demand was not only that Bill Bratton should be fired, but also that the policy of broken windows policing should end. I'm not aware of any reason to believe that Bratton's successor, James O'Neill, who has worked closely with Bratton and is a thirty-three year NYPD veteran, is going to change the policy in any meaningful way.

RD: The Department of Justice investigations of the Ferguson and Boston police departments concluded they were systematically targeting neighborhoods of color and poorer neighborhoods. In Ferguson, Black neighborhoods were targeted as a matter of policy in order to generate revenue from violations, even when their own statistics showed they would catch more criminals if they targeted areas that were not predominantly Black.

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How important is that sort of documentation by the D.O.J. for the abolition movement?

NH: I'm a computer programmer by trade, so I deal with data, and I definitely think it is useful to have these kinds of systemic investigations. At the same time, **I'm not sure that there was anything in the Department of Justice reports that couldn't have been learned just by listening to the people in Ferguson, or Baltimore.** The Department of Justice could probably choose police departments from around the country at random, conduct this kind of investigation, and find the same patterns in almost every case. Policy makers always want to say that their decisions are data-driven, but look at the sources of the data. Having an outside source for the data, like the Department of Justice, may be better or less biased than having the police say, oh, we collected the data and we investigated ourselves and it turns out that everything is great.

As abolitionists, we need to be doing our own data collection based in the community, so we can hear the voices of people who are affected directly without having the federal government as an intermediary.

Nabil Hassein Interview con't

Ultimately the Department of Justice, as a law enforcement agency itself, is never going to put out anything that points in the direction of abolition. It may highlight some of the problems with these departments, but a lot of the suggestions it makes are contradicted by its own data, or by other publicly available information. Like the rhetoric about restoring trust between the police and the community. **I would challenge anyone to name a point in time when there was trust between the police and the community.** Give me a city and a year, and let's talk about that.

There is also talk about recruiting more police officers of color, but Baltimore should be a pretty decisive refutation of this idea. In Baltimore you have a Black mayor, a Black DA, a majority Black city council, and one of the most heavily Black police forces in the nation. The result of all this diversity and inclusion is that Black cops are the ones who murdered Freddie Gray. Again, the issues are systemic and result from the racist nature of policing and the system the police uphold. That the Department of Justice validated what residents of Ferguson and Baltimore have been saying all along is a good thing, but the problem is, people weren't listening to the voices of the people in the first place.

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Ultimately I think abolitionists have to build independence straight from the communities, and it's not going to come from a Department of Justice report.

RD: There's been an emphasis on outreach to other movements lately: to the Native American Water Protectors at Standing Rock, to the Palestinian struggle...

NH: Having an internationalist perspective, understanding that our struggles are bound together, is critical. **When we become limited by artificial national boundaries, we play to and reinforce the exact same system that's oppressing us.** Millions March is also an anti-imperialist, anti-American group, and it's important to see that this is just one example of how the United States has always been a white supremacist, racist, settler, oppressor nation. The United States government is enormously powerful, has access to enormous wealth and resources, including military resources. But the borders that exist now are not the borders for all time, and the United States government has no legitimacy when you look at how it's been dishonoring the treaties it's signed with Native peoples. It's important to discuss what this country and this flag stands for, what it represents.

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Like with Colin Kaepernick refusing to stand for the anthem — that's right on. It's important that we stand in solidarity with Native peoples, and with Palestinians, Puerto Ricans, and all those who are being oppressed by U.S. imperialism.

Speaking of Standing Rock and the water protectors there, a few of us from Millions are planning to travel there next week. There have been many contingents from different groups within the Movement, which is enormously important. **When we think about the history of white supremacy and settler colonialism in this land, the connection between Black and Native communities becomes very clear.** Not to say that all the connections are positive ones. There's certainly been many cases where people in each community have contributed to oppression of people in the other community. But that's no different from the ways that people within the Black community have contributed to the oppression of other Black people.

That's an issue that we have to face forthrightly, and think about how we can build connections with our communities that would actually lead to liberation for all of us.

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There's no way that Black people are going to get free while indigenous people still have no control over the land and over their destiny.

That connection is the same connection between struggles in this land and struggles in Palestine. It's a similar colonial occupation, deeply racist, denying the right to national self-determination. Given the fact that the Israeli government is absolutely dependent on the United States government for financial and military aid and for diplomatic cover, it's clear that we have an obligation to say that we stand in solidarity with the Palestinians.

RD: We seem to be in a period similar to the '60s and early '70s, when movements were growing and fighting for change. How far do you think we can move the ball in, say, five years? What would be a successful move forward?

NH: I think the future is very unpredictable. Recently, there was the vote for the U.K. to exit the European Union, and I think that's a harbinger of things to come. Look what's happening in Rojava, with Kurds and other folks in Syria and Iraq and the surrounding region, really taking control of their own communities and their own destiny against the old style of governance.

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There's an immense amount to be learned from that in terms of truly democratic institutions being created in this land, for people to start to take control over their own lives. As far as what we can accomplish, I contrast police and prison abolition with reform, because reformism tends to reinforce the overall system, and it's important for us to avoid that.

At the same time we have to recognize that there's no way for us to leap from the world we live in to a world without jails and prisons or police. We can use abolition as an ideal, and then think about which steps are actually steps in the direction of abolition, and which ones are not. For example, there's a lot of discussion around body cameras. But in North Carolina we see a law that prevents the public from having access to body cam footage – so this so-called reform was just used to increase the police's powers of surveillance.

It's important for the Movement to have clear ways of distinguishing what are steps forward and what are not.

Anything that reduces the police budget, reduces the numbers of police, that limits the situations in which police are legally allowed to use force, is a step forward. Those are the kind of measures within the current framework that actually advance abolition and Black liberation.

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Ultimately, the U.S. Constitution and the United States, as a racist settler-oppressor nation, are incompatible with Black liberation, with Native peoples' liberation, and even with the liberation of white people as workers under capitalism. I think all these things are ultimately going to have to be swept away, but I don't expect to see all of that happen within the next five years. Movements can continue to build strength, we can think about how we can include working people with a variety of schedules, and include parents and disabled folks. How we can draw in as much participation from this society as possible, to continue to build our numbers and our reach.

RD: How important was the recently published Vision for Black Lives for building the Movement?

NH: Although I'm not in full agreement with all of the platform, it's definitely a step forward. Ultimately our orientation has to remain towards the streets, towards building the independent strength of our communities in order to address gender violence and inter-communal violence without State intervention. **We need to draw in more people to participate in movements and build up the solidarity between movements.**

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Breaking the nationalist, patriotic, jingoistic, pro-U.S. attitude is immensely important, as is speaking about the true history of this land. These are steps along the way. But this U.S. has always been a racist, capitalist, patriarchal, imperialist nation. Trump is telling the truth more than Hillary Clinton, in terms of what this nation is about and what it wants to go back to. **The**

Democrats dishonest response to "Make America Great Again" is that America has always been great. I think the truthful response is that America has never been great. As that consciousness penetrates more and more we're going to see people from all backgrounds demanding a change, demanding control over their own lives.

RD: As I do these interviews with activists and organizers, it seems women are much more equally represented than in past movements, especially in leadership roles.

NH: It's really important for us to think about the role of gender within movements. One of my comrades sent me a quote from a Native protestor called Defender Eagle at Standing Rock who said, "I think that we've waited long enough in various ways and means to listen always to what the white man tells us to do, and the time is dawning and the age is beginning when we listen again to our indigenous femininity."

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A lot of people want to fight against the oppression that specifically affects them, but they don't want to fight against oppression that gives them some kind of benefit. Sexist, patriarchal Black men and racist white feminists are the two best-known examples, but it could be brought up in the context of any oppression. It's clear from experience and history that this kind of politics can't possibly work, that it can't win, and we have to see the connections between all these types of oppression. **It's also clear that the leadership of women, of disabled folks, of queer and trans folks, those who are most oppressed by society and have the most reason to fight for change, is crucial.** That the Black Lives Matter hashtag and organization was founded by three queer Black women, and what Defender Eagle was saying about the role of women at Standing Rock, are connected.

RD: Absolutely. Some of the women I interviewed who were most active in the 60's talked about feeling marginalized within the movement. Maybe we're finally moving past that...

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NH: Women were leaders in many ways in the movements of the '60s and '70s. The majority of the Black Panther membership were women, and women played crucial roles in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and SNCC. There's still a lot of problematic gender politics in activist communities, but I see more open discussion of it, and we're seeing women come to the forefront more — and that's a healthy and positive step. I think it's a great strength of the movement. There's a lot more work to be done in that regard, but I'm optimistic.

RD: Since we started this dialog, Trump was elected. What's your basic take-away?

NH: His election is revealing of a lot of things. For one thing, it shows how deeply unpopular the neoliberal establishment, as represented by Hillary and the Democrats, is with the country. She did get more votes than Trump, so it also reveals one of the many ways that America is not a democracy, and never has been.

Trump's support is very real, and very deep. The election really sheds light on the nature of the nation as a settler colony turned empire, founded on white supremacy at a basic level, and shows what a strong constituency that kind of racist appeal still has for a huge chunk of voters in this country.

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RD: There had been a lot of organizing on the Left focused on fighting a neo-liberal agenda with Hillary Clinton in the White House. It is a whole new game now, for the movement?

NH: In terms of what Trump's election means for Leftist strategy, or community building or the Movement for Black Lives, **people are now talking about 'making America ungovernable,' and I think that's basically the right direction to go in.**

The legitimacy of the political process is at, or close to, an all time low. This presents an opportunity to get people more invested in alternatives that we create for ourselves, instead of constantly investing our hopes in the current system.

I was slightly surprised at how fast the Democrats folded after the election. The very next day you had Hillary saying that we have to keep an open mind and give Trump a chance to lead, and Obama saying he supports the president elect. They still believe in the system and uphold the system because it protects them and their power.

The police unions all supported Trump, which shows the heightened urgency of building alternative structures for a lot of the things we've been talking about: self defense, for community safety, gender violence...

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RD: We had the two least popular candidates in history running for president. Part of me thinks this gives us an enormous opening for eventually organizing broad support for coordinated non-cooperation, a general strike, or becoming ungovernable, as you say.

NH: I don't know if it's an enormous opening, but it's the opening that we have. It's what we have to use. I can't help but think about a Malcom X quote about the 1964 election:

If BJ had been running all by himself, he would not have been acceptable to anyone. The only thing that made him acceptable to the world was that the shrewd capitalists, the shrewd imperialists, knew that the only way people would run towards the fox would be if you showed them a wolf. So they created a ghastly alternative. And it had the whole world — including people who call themselves Marxists — hoping that Johnson would beat Goldwater. I have to say this: Those who claim to be enemies of the system were on their hands and knees waiting for Johnson to get elected — because he is supposed to be a man of peace. And at that moment he had troops invading the Congo and South Vietnam! He even has troops in areas where other imperialists have already withdrawn.

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If you just change the names of the candidates and the names of the countries that the US is invading, it applies just as much to 2016 as it does to 1964. It's a little bit depressing to look back and see that it's been over 50 and we're still in the same situation.

Of course, in 1964, Johnson won, and Goldwater lost. This year, it was actually the wolf that got into the office rather than the fox.

RD: That same year, '64, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party challenged the Democrats to racially integrate the delegates at their National Convention. **John Lewis** has a great quote about that experience being the turning point of the Civil Rights Movement. It sort of predicts the experience of the Berniecrats in 2016:

Until then, despite every setback and disappointment and obstacle we had faced over the years, the belief still prevailed that the system would work, the system would listen, the system would respond. Now, for the first time, we had made our way to the very center of the system. We had played by the rules, done everything we were supposed to do, had played the game exactly as required, had arrived at the doorstep and found the door slammed in our face.

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I'm wondering what the lesson will be for the folks who worked on the Sanders campaign, "doing everything we were supposed to do," only to have the door slammed in their face by the Democratic Party.

NH: I think that working from within the Democratic Party is a dead end. I hope the lesson that people draw is that the system keeps doing this, because that's what the system is designed to do.

The only hope is to break out of the system, to break the cycle, to destroy the system and to create a different system instead. I hope that's the conclusion that people draw.

Obviously, we've seen that a lot of liberals and Democrats are instead coming to the conclusion that the problem is Putin and Russia, and basically doubling down on US nationalism and jingoism. Those people are no allies of mine. That just doesn't lead in the direction of liberation. A lot of people who might be emotionally upset with Trump, still don't seem to be moving in any political direction that I see as positive.

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Even with those kind of negative signs, which are important to see, there are signs of hope. I really don't know how to measure the relative strengths of all these trends, but ultimately the polarization in society is increasing. While some sections of society are more and more ungovernable, other sections are still very loyal.

I really don't know how it turns out.

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